

LENA MÜLLER  
PROPOSAL END EXAM 2012

FILM BASED ON *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY* BY HAROLD  
PINTER

Description of project:

A group of people are in a small empty living room. They all seem to be guests of the party, spread around the room. It is not clear who's birthday it is. In the middle of the room, there is a woman sitting on a sofa. Is she the birthday girl, or is she the present? The men stare at her, devouring her with their eyes. The whole is a *tableau vivant*. The actors are nearly motionless. Even though nothing seems to be happening, you can feel the violent atmosphere. The candles on the cake are blown out. There is singing. The atmosphere is threatening, and the party gets a different meaning.

In May 2011 I designed the set for Harold Pinter's theatre play, *The Birthday Party* (1960) at Nationale Toneel in The Hague. Together with Susanne Kennedy, the director of the play, I want to take our interpretation of *The Birthday Party* and extend it into a different context as a video installation. The end result should be a film of approximately 10 minutes in length suitable to be presented at our end-exam exhibition.

Audience:

During rehearsals it was often brought home to us that the stage design I created resembles in many ways a film set, or rather in particular the set of a soap opera. The two dimensional quality of the stage design summoned up memories of various bad TV series from the 90s. (I should add that these connections seemed to us a good thing!) With this in mind, the costumes, decor and acting style

of the piece made reference to such productions. This inspired us with the initial idea that we might use the set again for a film. Moreover, after the theatre production had successfully come to an end, we realized that Pinter's play itself contains material that we both wanted to work with again and to explore further, but in a different context than theatre. We are looking for a way of presenting our work and deepening our practice, one that gives us space to concentrate on the strongest and most interesting moments from a play text. Instead of telling the story to a live audience, we want to reach our potential viewers in the more individual and private way possible through film and video.

#### Subject matter:

The starting point of the film will be a party, taking place in a living room. So far this follows the opening premise of Pinter's play. As is standard in 'fourth wall' sets, the design in the theatre version consisted of a closed box with one open wall in front, opposite to the audience. However in this case, a shutter that periodically closed this wall off was used to make scene changes. The audience saw the play only from one perspective, which was frontal, from outside the box. In the film, the camera might be situated inside the box, among or between the actors.

This will help us to come closer to what interested us in the human interaction in the play.

In the theatre play, the wooden, marionette-like movements of the actors prompted thoughts of alienation and distance. Action became behaviour, mere gestures. One of the questions we wanted to ask were: are we marionettes or well-programmed cut outs? Does anything like a free will exist? The staging wanted to explore the possibility that identity is only a question of role playing, and to examine the question as to whether or not we are responsible for our deeds.

We would like to investigate these questions further, but with different tools. It is *The Birthday Party*, but not as we know it; this time Pinter's play can be glimpsed from a different perspective. We want to investigate the violence lying underneath the so-called 'everyday scenes'. The violence that lies behind celebrating a birthday party could be an interesting starting point. How can such violence manifest itself, in to take one example from the play itself, singing an innocent birthday song to someone?

#### Relationship to relevant previous practice:

In a vital sense, this work arises from my previous practice in so far as it involves a return to and a reimagining of an already completed work. In particular, it means a re-engagement with that work's most confrontational scene: that is, the party itself.

#### Working Methodology:

I have developed the idea for this film project in cooperation with Susanne Kennedy, the director of the theatre play. We shall be working together closely conceptually. Susanne Kennedy will be the director responsible for the actors, and I shall be the art director of the film, responsible for its look. The editing will again be a collaborative process between Susanne Kennedy and me.

Het Nationale Toneel has offered to help us by putting up the set in their building for two weeks during January 2012. Het Nationale Toneel is also interested in showing the film in one of their theatre spaces.

#### Relevant histories:

I am particularly interested in the ways that the film may make use of the work of Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thijs, taking the way they use video stills or have amateurs acting in closed airless spaces as a starting point for my own work.

Similarly I see my work as resonating with that of Saskia Wolbers,

particularly her use of walls that apparently melt away.

The example of Francis Bacon is also important for this project, which will try to summon up, as he does, the horror of deformed bodies exhibited on a piece of furniture in an empty space.

In all these cases it is the intimations of the way in which space can be both empty and filled, just as private histories can be both present and invisible that intrigues me.

### Potential problems:

Though I have made a number of videos for theatre productions and for art projects, neither of us have collaborated before in making a short 'narrative' film.

In this way, the project is especially exciting to me, in so far as it enables me to develop skills that I already have, and to stretch them in directions that are new to me. In this way, I believe that this end-project will parallel all the work that I have done for this MA at Piet Zwart – in both building on my strengths and challenging me to produce new kinds of work.

### Summary/conclusion:

In short, I am excited at the prospect of working on this end-exam project. I feel that I will learn many things, and produce a piece of work that is a summation of all I have done in the last two years, and an indication of where my work might go in the future.

### Research background, expand on history:

I will explore the work of the artists mentioned, and also examine something of the history of Pinter production and filmings, and other work done on film in theatrical spaces. More generally, I may explore more (as I did for the original production of *The Birthday Party*) into marionette theatre, puppet shows, Punch and Judy,

mechanical toys, and the interest of other artists and writers in this subject, from Hoffmann to the Surrealists.

Workplan/timeframe:

My provisional schedule is as follows:

October 2011:

Application for Funding with the help of Production Manager

Looking for actors, cameraman, assistant director

October to December 2011:

Writing a storyboard

Investigating possible changes of the set with help of Cinema 4D

January 2012:

Filming for two weeks in in Het Nationale Toneel in Den Haag

February to May 2012:

Editing

June 2012:

Prepare Presentation

July 2012:

Presentation

Budget:

I'm planning to apply for funding with Fonds BKVB and others.

Bibliography (works to be consulted):

Primary Texts:

Loher, Dea, *Land Ohne Worte* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 2007).

Pinter, Harold, *The Birthday Party, and Other Plays* (London: Methuen & Co., 1960)

Secondary Material:

Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman, (New York: Semiotexte, 1983).

Goffman, Erving, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971).

Merritt, Susan Hollis, *Pinter in Play: Critical Strategies and the Plays of Harold Pinter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

Mundy, Jennifer, (ed.), *Surrealism: Desire Unbound* (London: Tate Publishing, 2001).

Speaight, George, *Punch and Judy: A History* (London: Studio Vista, 1970).